

Collective Research Focused on Change as Research Excellence

A Reflection Paper for the 2013 IDRC Canadian Learning Forum

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Research Project Title	For the people of Ada, salt is life: social movement learning in the defence of communal access to Ghana's Songor salt lagoon
Location of research	Ada, Greater Accra Region, Ghana
Dates research conducted	Participatory design process 2010-2011 Main PAR study 2011-2013
Partner(s)	Radio Ada, Ghana; Ada Songor Advocacy Forum Kofi Larweh, Wilna Quarmyne, Sheena Cameron, Jemima Larweh, Albert Apertorgbor, Isaac Djabletey, Erica Ofoe, Emily Amerdjoe, Rachel Garbary, Lisa Gunn, Leah Jackson, Stephanie MacKinnon, Ceira Young, Tom Orr
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Types of research methods used	Participatory Action Research; Qualitative Case Study
Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?	Currently being explored

Introduction

There are those who would say research excellence is best determined by how useful it is and how readily you can apply the research findings (c.f. Thompson, 2001). In contrast, exponents of a pure science position would emphasize how research contributes to understanding the world, regardless of its immediate applicability (c.f. Cohen, 2006).

From my position, and from the position of those with whom I work, neither of these descriptions suffices because they both ignore the politics of knowledge, the knower and the known. From our position, it is not the use or purity of research that matters, but who's interest the research serves and the way it can change power relations.

To echo Marx's famous aphorism (with Engels, 1845), the point of research is not to understand the world, but rather to change it. However, this paper will also argue that the point of participatory research is to work together with people to better understand and contribute to how they would change their own world. With this understanding in mind, I would describe "research excellence" as research that comes from those at the center of the research, serves their needs in addressing power relations, and ultimately is owned by them. To illustrate this, I will reflect on our work with a Ghanaian social movement called the **Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF)**. This movement has been working to defend and strengthen communal access and control of West Africa's largest salt yielding lagoon, the Songor, which is the basis of a 60,000 strong, 400 year old artisanal salt winning practice (c.f. Ada salt cooperative committee, 1989; Manuh, 1994; Amate, 1999).

In order to position this concept of excellence, I would draw on Choudry and Kapoor's (2010) research on social movements in which they take pains to differentiate between research that is embedded in movement articulations, and research that is framed and contained through academic forces. They describe the former as being ultimately supportive of movement goals and owned by movement members, whereas the latter is described as extractive in nature, despite the language of social activism that it may use.

In many ways, this tension also surfaces in the different ways in which Participatory Action Research (PAR) is mobilized. Hall (2005) and Fals Borda (2006) have both discussed the origins of this approach to participant-owned research, as well as the ways in which it is becoming popularized. Fals Borda in particular, notes that PAR began as a push-back on the colonial trend of studying of exotized 'others', and rather generate spaces of mutual meaning-making. He also notes how participatory action research – a

term he coined – has become institutionalized in thousands of research bodies, and yet there is very little acknowledgement of the Southern origin of the term.

Fals-Borda shares a concern much-more-forcefully articulated by Jordan (2003) that PAR is being co-opted away from its desire to make research mutually-constituted and owned by researchers and communities/groups/movements. Jordan notes how this cooptation, exemplified by the World Bank's adoption of the term, runs the risk of turning action-research processes that were designed to help marginalized communities to better control how their own reality is defined into a mere stabilizing process of "inclusion" without any substantive changes in power dynamics. Vincent (2012) has shown how this idea of participation is often used by those external to communities to construct collectivities, or 'participatory' groupings that undermine local histories of struggle, which provides further evidence of the importance of working from within locally-constituted movements.

Nonetheless, Hall & Turray (2006) reveal how integral participatory action research processes continue to be for movement research in adult education circles. This stream of research, known as social-movement learning, has a strong tradition of participatory, collaborative research; and yet, as Walter (2007) has pointed out, the majority of these studies are dominated by Euro-American dichotomies of Old Social Movement (Marxist and labour movements) and New Social Movement (identity-based movements, such as the LGBTQ movement) theories of organizing (c.f. Holst, 2002; Finger, 1989; Holford, 1995).

Echoing Fals Borda to some extent, Kapoor (2008) has underscored the dangers of assuming the portability of this dichotomy in Southern contexts. He, like others (c.f. Foley, 1999; Walters, 2005), advocates a strong connection to context when analyzing social movement learning. This echoes warnings of Eurocentric dominance in critical theories by Afrocentric writers, such as Mamdani (1996) who argues for using context-rich approaches to analyzing African phenomena.

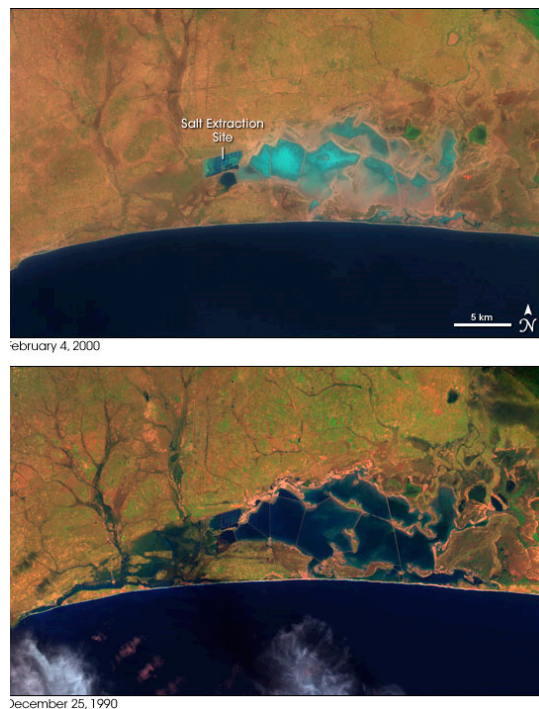
Drawing these strands of thought together, Choudry & Kapoor (2010) have argued that participatory research, and PAR in particular, must be owned by the movements at the centre of social movement learning studies, rather than being used by academics – especially in the North – to carry out studies that are ultimately more concerned with extracting information than in responding to the movement's needs and priorities. They note that the relationships that frame this research, along with the way in which the research is conceived (i.e. is it owned by the movement from the outset?) is critical to avoid this type of extractive relationship. This argument echoes Fine (2007) and Fine *et*

a/. (2004) who have expanded on the importance of mutually-defined-and-owned, participatory processes and goals, especially in contexts of struggle. Kane (2001) has been equally clear that movement-owned research is crucial to contributing to movement goals, and that this ownership needs to emerge from the outset.

This logic very much informed the framing of the PAR process of our research study, but what is so interesting here is the way that collective framing led the very design process to become a site of movement knowledge-generation and action.

Before going into more depth on this process, let me summarize the three most important criteria of research excellence in this context:

1. Those at the center of the research own the research design and implementation process;
2. Elements of the research are ultimately useful to the group at the center of the research, even while there may be other elements important to academic circles; and,
3. Research is not just about extracting information to know the world more fully; at its root, it's about changing power relations in ways defined by those at the heart of the research.



Songor Lagoon – showing effects of climate change that increases pressure on the resource (source: <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=6076>)



Salt winning processes – current atsiakpo balkanization on the left; communal salt winning on right
(sources: Nyani Quarmyne (left); http://www.humanpoweredtransport.net/photos/africa_return/dscn0142.html (right))

The How of the Research and Some Challenges Along the Way

Hark Almighty, put on the sunlight; I say, Almighty Radio Ada, put on the sunlight forever. Whatever is under water, through you comes to light. Whatever is underground, through you comes to light. [...]

Look behind us, there comes Government after us. [Ada] Okor People. I repeat, turn and look behind. Dangme People, Government is catching up with us. But what is the issue? Atsiakpoⁱ is consuming the whole Songor. And all attempts to stop it have proved futile, the fire rages on.

Government could not help but to step in. They told our Elders, they are going to take over Songor, to quell conflicts so that we live in peace. Radio Ada heard of this development, took on their broadcast armour, mobilized us; we entered the communities and started informing the people; we are spreading it.

*Whatever the consequences, we shall overcome. Whatever the consequences, Okor descendants, we shall overcome at all cost. Let's put our breath into one trumpet and sound it loud to the ears of Government. That guns and guns came against Songor, axes upon axes came after Songor; I mean Government should know that guns and guns came; axes upon axes came after Songor.
[...]*

What someone does not know; I say, what one doesn't know, someone knows! (Repeat emphatically). (Audience response): What someone does not know; what one doesn't know, someone knows! What someone does not know; I say, whatever one doesn't know, someone knows! (Repeat emphatically). (Audience response): What someone does not know; what one doesn't know, someone knows!

Hail, Goodwill (response); come, Goodwill! (Applause).

Excerpt from a song from one of the first meetings of the PAR that emerged from the collaborative design process (Composed by Akpetiyo and translated and transcribed by Kofi Larweh)



*Akpetiyo, the 'Divine Singer' of the ASAF movement,
and a leader of the women's core of the movement
(source: Leah Jackson)*

It is important to begin this section with the voice of Akpetiyo, one of the key emerging women leaders of the current struggle in the Songor salt-yielding lagoon. In many ways she personifies the process through which this research became embedded in and owned by the ASAF movement from the outset. At the end of the collaborative planning sessions in 2010, she complained we had talked too much and did not act enough – and she wore red that day to emphasize the point! Her songs, including the one above, further spurred the movement on to action, and her leadership also signaled the emergence of a strong women's agenda within the movement.

Over the next three years, as the women's agenda that emerged from these first meetings was subsequently enacted, it underscored how Akpetiyo's contributions continued to ensure the ASAF movement would not shy away from the difficult issues facing the Songor – from the issue of the internal balkanization of the resource known as atsiakpo, to the growing threat of government expropriation linked to Ghana's burgeoning oil industry. It is crucial that her voice and her song frames the way in which we begin to discuss this participatory action research study; beginnings matter (Langdon, 2009a), not just in how they are enacted, but also in how they are conceived.

In 2008, as part of my doctoral research on broader processes of movement learning in Ghana since its return to democracy (c.f. Langdon, 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2011), I and a core group of activist-educators associated with this doctoral study were invited to meet with members of the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF). This meeting took place at

the local community radio station, Radio Ada – a major ally and partner of the movement. These discussions, while contributing to the doctoral study, also outlined a desire for future collaboration on research that would both deepen understanding of the movement learning processes and contribute to the movement's own self-reflexivity and, hopefully, strategies.

In 2010, with access to a small grant for a collaborative research-design process with the movement, we began a series of discussions on a longer research relationship that emerged as a successful larger proposal, and now project. However, what is ultimately more important to the movement membership is that the design process itself was in and of itself quickly reconstituted by them to be a reflexive process, such that a study of social movement learning became only one feature of the emergent movement agenda.

Foundational to this emerging vision was a mutual-education process that not only formed the basis of the research study to follow, but much more importantly, a collectively-constituted understanding of the struggle at hand and the important lessons from the past to move forward. While the design process asked, *“what themes and processes should frame a potential longer-term study of movement learning in the Ada movement?”*, the movement members reconfigured this question to focus on *“how do we achieve a similar and collectively determined understanding of what our struggle is today and the best way to tackle it?”*

In this sense, what was originally envisioned in the first discussions in 2008 as a conversation on movement research design became in and of itself a part of the movement's knowledge generation, planning and reflection processes. This synergistic parallel structure, in which movement research design and movement processes feed into each other, exemplifies the call by Choudry and Kapoor (2010) for research that is embedded in movements from its very outset.

Returning to Akpetiyo above, the emergence of the women's agenda throughout the collaborative design process helps exemplify how the design process became owned by and served the movement. The reconfiguration of meeting agendas to assist in mutual education processes and through this, the emergence of a common understanding of priorities for the movement and plans to be implemented, is codified in the women's agenda that emerged. Forcefully asserting Akpetiyo's point that action and not more talk was needed, the women's agenda outlined a number of key actions that they would take in the months and years ahead. These included:

- building ties with *Queen Mothers*, a new category of traditional leader that gave women's voices an opening to enter discussions at Ada's Traditional Council;
- establishing a popular education program for sharing the history of the struggle over the Songor;
- adding dissemination of knowledge about the government plans in the past to this education program;
- provoking discussion about what a people's plan for the Songor would look like; and
- organizing community-level action groups to organize various types of activities to confront *atsiakpo* and even more fundamentally, to build and maintain non-violent spaces of dialogue that could focus internal divisions on the source of the problem: decision-makers at the traditional, local and national level.



ASAF women demonstrating at 2012 Asafotufiami Festival in Big Ada (Source: Stephanie MacKinnon)

Each of these items has been accomplished throughout the 12 major communities surrounding the Songor. The strength of the commitment to this agenda provided the organizational empowerment for women from these 12 communities to demonstrate at the 2012 Asafotufiami Festival – Ada's premier cultural and political festival that draws over 10,000 visitors, including Ministers of State and, often, the Vice President or President of Ghana. They also conceived of, produced and then took people through a popular education tapestry (pictured below) that depicts the history of the lagoon, and forcefully makes the point that Ada identity and culture is embedded in a healthy collective relationship with the Songor Lagoon. It was truly inspiring to have the collaborative design process appropriated by women committed to this struggle to

articulate and follow through their own plan of action. It also highlights just how thoroughly the participatory action research has been framed by and feeds into movement aspirations – a quality of the research that was established from the start.



Popular education tapestry created by Women's core of ASAF and shared with over 2000 people at the 2012 Asafotufiami Festival in Big Ada (Source: Jonathan Langdon)

This experience illustrates how true participatory action research has to be responsive and flexible, itself moving along with the movement. An indication of the strength and responsiveness of this research was how it responded to a challenge to the movement during the first year of the study. The 2008 discovery of oil in Ghana had repercussion for the salt sector that only became apparent in 2011, as the central government began making moves to expropriate the lagoon resource and turn it over to a petrochemical processor. Ghanaian academics have already begun making a case for this connection (c.f. Affam & Asamoah, 2011), even as a series of government and donor sponsored initiatives advocate for this approach (c.f. Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009).

In response, ASAF shifted from focusing exclusively on the internal balkanization of the lagoon and also mobilized against this new external threat. Although initially focused on an internal subject, the collaboratively-design-and-owned research process easily scaled-out with the movement to address this new external challenge and helped to deepen the reflection and dialogue processes on how best to contest it, even as the emergent learning of this new context was rigorously documented. Of critical importance for the movement, this reflective process was understood later as being a pivotal component in the successful suspension of the expropriation attempts.



Validation of the People's History of Struggle over the Songor, translated to Dangme through a collective writing process, and broadcast here in Toflokpo – a central salt Songor salt community
(source: Rachel Garbary)

The movement also identified documenting their past and present as crucial to their struggle. In response, over the last year-and-a-half, a People's History of the Struggle over Songor has been collectively pulled together from dozens of different vantage points and voices, the majority of whom are fluent only in *Dangme*. This past August, they completed documenting this history, translated it back into Dangme and subsequently broadcast it on Radio Ada. When the draft manuscript was validated with a community, the sense of ownership and usefulness of this research outcome were palpable. "it is our own story we are hearing," stated a member of the male youth focus group. "The only thing we would change," he added, "is what the company did to so many of our elders. We cannot let this happen again."

The collective and inclusive nature of this history, along with the dialogue-based nature of the movement praxis (reinforced by the research approach) has made the movement meetings the emphatic hub of all open discussion of Songor issues. At the final research dissemination meeting, held on August 15th, 2013, a number of participants stated that ASAF is the only place in all of Ada where Songor issues are being discussed openly, and where hidden agendas can be questioned. The ability to broadcast these discussions throughout the Dangme-speaking area has also meant countless other voices can speak to these issues. In a recent phone-in show on the Songor, one caller noted, how important openness was for all "to get opportunity through Radio Ada's studios to [have our] say [on] this [situation] is as a result of hard won rights that allow dialogue instead of war." Excellent research not only helps document moments of reflection like this, but to add to people's ability to act from them. Echoing this, Grif Foley (1999, p. 143), one of the prominent social movement learning scholars notes, it is such

moments of analysis that “provide a necessary basis for future strategies.”



Members of ASAF at the close of a research dissemination meeting on August 15th, 2013

Reflections on Roles

Relationships are of primary importance to this type of work, and are the basis of the excellence of what emerges. As Kofi Larweh put it recently, “relationships are the work” – whether this is the ASAF work or the research study that was interwoven with it. I remember several years ago my PhD supervisor saying the greatest moment of his research experience was when the research was taken over by the Adavasis movement he was working with. This experience was the basis of his collaboration with Choudry, drawn on above, to differentiate between academic PAR and PAR grounded in movement articulations. At the time I wondered how this might be possible, and the potential dangers of making the research not as “academic.” Ultimately, though, from my perspective now, research is about sharing people’s stories, and people using these stories to change the dynamics of power to work in more inclusive and egalitarian ways. There is real strength in stories, especially when people craft them together – a point illustrated by the collective “People’s History” book that is emerging from the research as I write this. In fact, the small money this paper will bring will be going to help publish this book in Ghana.



Myself, pictured on the left holding a copy of Who Killed Maggie – an earlier collective account of struggle in the Songor. This was taken at one of the ASAF open meetings where my voice was one of many; in contrast, in the middle, myself and one Canadian research can be seen on the outside of a community engagement (in 2011), while on the right is a picture of two of the Canadian research assistants (Ceira Young and Tom Orr) who are very much in the background at another community engagement (in 2011).

(Sources: Ceira Young (left); Nyani Quarmyne (right))

The decision for me to be involved in this IDRC process was deliberated upon by members of the movement and I, and ultimately was deemed a positive thing because it would a) share our version of research excellence, and b) lead to some support for the movement, and getting the first copies of the People's History off the press. In other words, telling the story of the movement in this context would contribute to the telling of their story in many other contexts.

However, in saying all this, I want to empathically convey the deliberative nature of how my role and the role of the rest of the research team from Canada was determined over time (there were two to three Canadian research assistants, working the seven member core Ghanaian research team). Very early on, in collective discussions at Radio Ada – in the open air studio they have – ASAF decided that during community engagements we (the Canadians) should stay in the background, but in the ongoing movement dialogue process (held at Radio Ada) I and the other Canadians members of the research team would be as any other voices in the discussions.

When it came to direct action, we wouldn't be involved, but would document what happened in solidarity with those acting. One Canadian research assistant really struggled with this, wanting to be part of the 2012 women's demonstration. But when, through critical reflection, she realized a) she could damage the movement by being a visible part of the demonstration, and b) being in solidarity with them and helping convey their struggle to contexts they can't reach was a very valuable role she could play.

This leads to me to my final point. Michelle Fine et al. (2004) have noted how strange it is that researchers question handing power over to participants in qualitative research,

which is the central tenant of participatory research. From their perspective, anything less is limited research, simply one person's unchallenged view on a particular context. In contrast, collaborative research leads to richer, more complex accounts because people build it and own it collectively.

This ultimately makes the research more ethical, as it is not extractive, and researcher assumptions are automatically questioned. If one begins with this honest belief, it is not difficult to have frank conversation about what is best for the collective involved, and what will help them get the most useful support for this collective work. As with all work with people, this issue is never fully settled, and is always an ongoing process of negotiation, but it means that in discussions about where we are going, I am only one voice in many. This means being honest at the outset and open throughout, while not hiding what you think and who you are. In effect, this honesty and a critically-open approach to the research relationship is the fourth criteria in our list of research excellence.



*Two women salt winners, mixing the salt in the brine, before scooping it out
(source: Nyani Quarmyne)*

Conclusion

Beginning collectively, ensuring there is a balance of power between researcher and participants – grounded in critical processes of reflections on relationships and roles – and ensuring the research continually and ultimately benefits those at the center of the research in ways that they see and define as important are all crucial elements in making research excellent. Knowing the world is interesting, changing it in ways that challenge power that are collectively defined and enacted is inspiring.



*The statue to the pregnant Maggie Kowunor, killed in 1985 by police—a stark reminder of this struggles costs
(source: Nyani Quarmyne)*

Epilogue

The discussions at the 2013 Learning Forum on Research for Change were fruitful, as many of those gathered saw synergies regarding their work, even as some divisions emerged between those speaking from a civil society context and those from an academic research context. This division was productive, however, and led to some profound reflections on the relationships between the two contexts.

Of special relevance to the research shared above was the conclusion that community engaged research has to involve community from the outset of research conversations, and not see it as something that is added in after the grant is received. This echoes the way in which research emerged in the context of Ada.

That being said, another area of division and debate concerned the nature of impact. Is research that leads to community and researcher capacity building and knowledge generation not considered impactful? Is impact only something that surfaces when a government or multi-lateral agency picks up the research conclusions? Is impact only understood by how many people are talking about the research, or how well it is covered in the Western media? To put it another way, is a successful communication strategy synonymous with successful impact?

The response that emerges from the research in Ada is fairly straightforward. When research is owned by those at the center of the research, impact needs to be understood in relation to the change agendas they are working on. Similarly, communication strategies that are concerned with these agendas need to be understood as intrinsic and relevant as ones that might highlight the research within a Western media or social media context. The tensions here between a careerist, self-promotional communication strategy and one that is geared towards supporting the change agenda of those in the center of the research needs to be highlighted. Thus, from the perspective of the research in Ada, the way that our current research is communicated in media contexts outside of Ghana needs to be mutually decided upon, and seen to be in solidarity with the mission of the movement. As Fine et al. (2004) note, we need to have a realistic and open conversation about the needs of all involved with the research and about how to communicate about the research.

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Endnote

ⁱ Atsiakpo (pictured on the left above) is the individualized balkanization of the lagoon – a recent phenomenon that undermines the communal access tradition and is especially detrimental to women's livelihood.